



FANTASTIC BEASTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM ★★★

RELEASED: Now Showing
DIRECTOR: David Yates
CAST: Eddie Redmayne, Katherine Waterston
RATING: M

Harry Potter on depressants.

A return to the Potterverse was inevitable, but what's surprising about *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* is its perpetually gloomy tone. If you thought *The Deathly Hallows* was dark, this is Harry Potter on depressants.

Newt Scamander (a sleepwalking Eddie Redmayne) is an English magizoologist in Prohibition-era New York, a destination on his global trip to catalogue magical creatures for what will become the titular Hogwarts textbook. When his TARDIS-like suitcase – containing numerous enchanted species – is accidentally switched for one belonging to aspiring baker Jacob Kowalski (Dan Fogler), the fantastic beasts are unleashed upon the city.

This is frowned upon by the US Magical Congress, who have strict rules outlawing magical creatures and must protect the wizarding community from exposure (cue memory-wiping Obliviate charms). Together with former Dark Arts investigator Porpentina Goldstein (Katherine Waterston) and Kowalski, Newt must track down and recapture the beasts (*Pokémon GO*, anyone?) and magically undo the damage they've done.

Lurking on the sidelines is Percival Graves (Colin Farrell), a brooding wizard who has a particular interest in a family of Second Saulems (a sect devoted to the persecution of magic users) – specifically their troubled son, Credence (Ezra Miller).

There's more to it than that – in fact there's a LOT going on in this film, including subplots involving the escape of a Voldemort-type named Grindelwald, and the threat posed by a destructive amorphous entity known as an Obscurus.

Despite the downbeat mood, period setting and relocation Stateside, this is still recognisably the Potterverse. The same creative team are casting the spells – director David Yates, producers Steve Cloves and David Heyman, and J.K. Rowling penning the screenplay – and have conjured a boldly different and more adult adventure aimed at the grown-ups who devoured the Potter novels as kids. But it's lacking the magic, fun and loveable characters that made us wild about Harry. Moreover, there's a sense that Rowling's universe has succumbed to the brand of comic book filmmaking consuming Hollywood. X-Men-like issues of tolerance and acceptance are raised, and the city-smashing climax is the kind that Marvel has made de rigueur.

Fans will enjoy the menagerie of beasts and the subtle differences between British and American wizardry (a Muggle is called a No-Maj in the States, and wands require a permit), but as the first in a five film franchise, *Fantastic Beasts* is a strangely inert introduction. You may find yourself feeling Obliviated as you leave the theatre.

Scott Hocking

I, DANIEL BLAKE ★★★★★

RELEASED: Now Showing **DIRECTOR:** Ken Loach
CAST: Dave Johns, Hayley Squires, Sharon Percy **RATING:** MA15+

Ken Loach may now be 80, but his latest film *I, Daniel Blake* shows that he remains as impassioned – and angry – as ever about the ever widening gaps in modern society between the haves and have-nots. This time, Loach and his longtime writing collaborator Paul Laverty zero in on the bureaucratic minefield that people must now navigate in the UK (and most other countries) when claiming welfare benefits. Eponymous hero Daniel (Dave Johns) is a middle-aged carpenter from Newcastle who has been recovering from heart surgery and has been told by his doctors that he is not yet healthy enough to return to full-time employment. However, when he is assessed by an "expert" from the social security department, he is deemed fit to work, so while he waits for his appeal to be heard, Daniel must prove he's actively seeking a new job to ensure some form of welfare payments. His struggles are contrasted with those of a young single mother Katie (Hayley Squires) from London whom he befriends. As is often the case, Loach draws beautifully naturalistic – and ultimately heartbreaking – performances from his largely unknown leads, and while the underlying message is bleak, there is still room for laughter, in particular Daniel's attempts to grapple with the internet and Kafkaesque civil servants. **John Ferguson**

THE ACCOUNTANT ★★★

RELEASED: Now Showing **DIRECTOR:** Gavin O'Connor **CAST:** Ben Affleck, Anna Kendrick, J.K. Simmons **RATING:** MA15+

Despite an all-star cast and action galore, *The Accountant* unfortunately ends up conforming to the drab and dreary stereotypes that surround the profession. A daft mash-up of *Rain Man* and *Jason Bourne*, Ben Affleck plays mysterious savant accountant Christian Wolff – just one of a number of his aliases – who is being hunted by US Treasury agents because it appears that his bookkeeping skills are highly valued by criminal and terrorist organisations around the world. With the authorities on his trail, Wolff takes a 'legitimate' accounting assignment at a high-tech robotics firm, where he discovers more than \$60 million has been siphoned out of the business. But when his investigation is abruptly terminated and he and co-worker Dana Cummings (Anna Kendrick) are targeted by assassins, Wolff's other skills – oh yeah, he is also a lethal marksman and martial arts fighter – come to the fore. Affleck is badly miscast as the autistic hero, although neither he nor the rest of talented ensemble – J.K. Simmons, John Lithgow, Jeffrey Tambor, Jon Bernthal – can do much with a woeful and needlessly complicated script, and the plodding direction of Gavin O'Connor. The finale leaves the door open for a sequel, but a full creative audit is required if this is ever to become an action franchise. **John Ferguson**

RATING KEY: ★★★★★ Wow! ★★★★★ Good ★★★★★ Not bad ★★★★★ Meh ★★★★★ Woof!